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STATE FOR NEA/MAG, DRL/IRF, AND A/OPR/OS - CAMERON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/23/2019

TAGS: PHUM KIRF PGOV ASCH MO

SUBJECT: EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS EXPELLED FOR ALLEGED PROSELYTIZING

REF: RABAT 336

Classified By: Consul General Millard for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 4 a group of Moroccan Christian converts and foreigners gathered in a home in the town of Saidia for a weekend of study and spiritual retreat. Moroccan police raided the house, confiscated personal items and religious material, and detained those present. The Moroccan Christians were released later that evening after being questioned and processed but the foreigners were driven to the Spanish border and summarily expelled. Shortly thereafter the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted DCM to complain about the alleged proselytizing activities of a prominent American citizen in Casablanca and his affiliated American school. Although the senior official warned that the American might be expelled and his school closed, the Mission believes this was most likely a warning since there has been no further action on the part of the Ministry. Coming on the heels of a similar incident in March 2009 in Casablanca (Reftel), the Government of Morocco is showing less tolerance for Christian activities whether they involve real or perceived proselytizing. End Summary.

Raid In Saidia

¶2. (C) Dr. Abdeltif Benhamou (protect), a Moroccan Christian who was present at the events in question, recounted to PolOff that a group of 14 Moroccan Christians from the surrounding towns gathered on December 4 in Saidia, near the Algerian border, for religious study and retreat. In addition to the Moroccans there were a number of expatriates including two South African men who were there as spiritual instructors, a Guatemalan citizen who has lived for some time in the Agadir region working on agricultural development projects, and a French-Algerian national married to a Moroccan. In the early evening a large number of police surrounded the rented house, confiscated personal and religious items, and transported all those present to a police station in the regional capital of Oujda. Police questioned the Moroccans, took their photos and fingerprints, confiscated their cell phones, and then released them shortly before midnight. The foreigners, however, were driven to the Spanish enclave of Melilla where they were summarily expelled.

¶3. (C) A Swiss national living in Oujda had rented the house for the weekend for the group's activities. The following day this man, who has lived in Oujda for more than 10 years and runs an NGO that works with handicapped children, was informed by the police that he had 24 hours to leave Morocco along with his wife and three children. None of the expulsion orders was signed by a judge as required by Moroccan law, Benhamou reported.

Harassment of Christians

¶4. (C) Benhamou complained about what he believes is the Government of Morocco's (GOM's) two-faced approach to dealing with Moroccan converts to Christianity. One the one hand, he said, they tell us we are free to be Christians and believe as we like, but on the other hand we are not recognized as a group and have no right to marry,

divorce, inherit, or be buried as Christians. Moreover, there is regular harassment and police intimidation although most of it is indirect, he said. The police will go to a Christian convert's parents or relatives and talk about his or her religious activities in order to create family pressure, or alternatively, he said, they will go to the person's work and raise doubts with his or her boss. Police may not even mention religion, but by showing up in the work place and asking questions and making insinuating comments, they create a climate of fear and people frequently lose their job, Behnamou said.

¶15. (C) Moroccan law prohibits proselytizing, though Benhamou and others argue that the police raids in Saidia have little to do with proselytizing. "The indigenous Christian community is very discreet, we worship in our homes but we need instruction and we turn to the outside world for it. We receive spiritual instruction from Egypt, Europe, the U.S. and wherever we can get it," Benhamou told us.

A Message to a Prominent American

¶16. (C) Shortly after the incident in Saidia, Ambassador Nasser Bourita, the Chief of Staff to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, called the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) and informed him that the GOM was very upset with Jack Rusenko (protect), a prominent American citizen in Casablanca and his affiliated private American school, the George Washington Academy (GWA), for their alleged proselytizing activities. Bourita claimed that Rusenko and GWA were responsible for sending Moroccan children abroad to train them to return to Morocco to proselytize. He warned that the GOM intended to expel Rusenko from Morocco and to close GWA. The DCM urged reflection and asked that Bourita give Rusenko an opportunity to respond to the allegations. Bourita replied that he would take the matter up with his colleagues and has not raised the issue since although he and the DCM have spoken and met in the intervening weeks.

GW Academy's Side of the Story

¶17. (C) December 14, Consul General Millard (CG) met with Mr. Rusenko to convey the MFA's message and the DCM's response. Rusenko, who helped establish the George Washington Academy (GWA) and has spent nearly two decades in Morocco working in education and with charitable institutions, expressed surprise at the accusations and denied GWA or personal involvement in proselytizing. He conjectured that perhaps the allegation regarding the training abroad stemmed from a misunderstanding of cases in which American GWA staff members have sent their children to a Christian summer camp in Europe. However, he emphasized, this involved a small number of people and had no relation to proselytizing. He also suggested that perhaps this might be in relation to a child who did not pass his year in school. The parents were upset and reacted by claiming a teacher tried to proselytize the child. In a follow-up e-mail to the CG, Rusenko also mentioned that GWA has rented out its facilities three times to recognized churches to hold a weekend conference for American Christian children in Morocco. Reviewing these events, Rusenko concluded that Bourita's call likely was prompted by the Saidia incident, noting that Benhamou's confiscated cell phone contained Rusenko's telephone number. Benhamou's wife is a Swiss national who works as a nurse at the George Washington Academy.

¶18. (C) Rusenko further argued that he and the George Washington Academy have taken great pains to ensure they do not run afoul of Morocco's anti-proselytizing laws. We have told the staff at GWA, he said, that you can live your religion but not openly on campus. Rusenko, who is well-connected and has good personal relations with numerous Moroccan officials and prominent personalities, suggested he might contact the MFA. However, in the subsequent communication to the CG, Rusenko sounded a more cautious tone and said that he will hold off on contacting the MFA so as not to stir the pot.

¶19. (C) The CG and Consular Chief also met with the Chairwoman of the Board of Directors of GWA, Deborah MacArthur, who sought and received guidance in response to her concern that many of the American citizens and their dependents teaching at GWA might be refused entry to Morocco upon their return from Christmas holidays. MacArthur stressed to the CG that all of the teachers are properly registered with the Moroccan authorities and that Mr. Rusenko, as of this

summer, no longer has any official position connected to the school he founded. The Consular Chief provided Mrs. MacArthur with ACS contact information.

Hopes, and Obstacles, to a New Religion Law

¶10. (C) Rusenko also noted that in his role as representative of the Anglicans on the Moroccan Council of Churches, the GOM has been discussing a possible new law to cover and regularize all monotheistic religions. Currently the Moroccan Constitution only recognizes Muslims and Jews. Rusenko commented that since the ruling Alaouite dynasty has so closely tied its legitimacy to Islam and the king's role as "Commander of the Faithful," the regime is afraid that any challenges to the state's version of Islam, be it from Iran, Algeria, or Christianity, could become a challenge to the throne.

Comment

¶11. (C) The GOM's reaction to the Saidia meeting and the swift expulsion of the foreigners, coming on the heels of a similar incident in March 2009, appear to demonstrate a decrease in government tolerance of Christian activities. We believe that the MFA's threats against Rusenko and GWA are most likely in reaction to the events in Saidia and are meant for the moment as a warning. End Comment.

MILLARD